First published as:

Danby, Susan J (2002) The communicative competence of young children. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood* 27(3):pp. 25-30.

The communicative competence of young children

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Abstract

This paper explores the verbal and non-verbal interaction of children in a preschool classroom. It analyses an episode in the block area to show the competent ways that some young boys use communication strategies to build their social worlds. Such understandings invite early childhood educators to reconsider young children's communicative competence and the ways they accomplish their social order.

Understandings of language interactions

In early childhood education, children's language typically has been studied from a developmental perspective. This approach has focused on a child's development of language or sometimes, on the child's *lack of* language. Recently, other perspectives have emerged that understand children's language differently. One such perspective is sociology of childhood, which recognises the complex language interactions in which young children engage with each other and with adults (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998; Mayall, 1999; Waksler, 1991). In recognising the competence of young children, this perspective provides new ways of understanding the talk and interactions of young children.

Many understandings of language interactions are based on Piaget's (1959) theory of cognitive and language development and Vygotsky's (1986) socio-cultural theory. These perspectives describe children as developing language-users and therefore not yet fully competent in understanding and using language as effectively as older children or adults might. Educators, then, provide opportunities for children to

develop and use language across a range of contexts, with particular emphasis given to the adults' role in scaffolding opportunities for language-rich environments.

In recent years, the view of children *developing* competence has been critiqued by writers using a sociological perspective (Mackay, 1991; Prout & James, 1997; Speier, 1976; Waksler, 1991). This view of children as *developing* encourages educators to see children as *incomplete* versions of adults. As Waksler (1991) says, the developmental approach describes children "as in their very nature not grown up and thus *not something* rather than *something*" (p. 63).

Contrast the approach that describes children as *developing* into adults with one that views children as already *competent* (Mackay, 1991). Here, I want to explore this alternate view of children and their language interactions. Instead of seeing children as developing towards language competence, I want to start with the idea that children, even children aged as young as three and four years, are competent already in their use of language and communication strategies. Instead of seeing children as incomplete, this perspective suggests that young children already know fundamental and underlying rules of language use in everyday activities.

While the more familiar developmental approach focuses attention on individual children's own learning and socialisation from a cognitive perspective, the sociological approach focuses more directly on the situated practices of the children. This less familiar perspective that sees children as competent describes children, through their talk and interaction, as actively constructing their own social situations (Mayall, 1996; Prout & James, 1997; Waksler, 1991). Gestures, movements, laughter, and even silences are considered important features in understanding how the children themselves make sense of their play.

Understandings gained from considering children's situated talk and interaction show how children build their own social worlds. This is not to denigrate developmental descriptions of children but rather to bypass comparisons and encourage a re-examination of the talk of children, recognising their complex and competent interaction work. To show this alternate perspective, I draw upon an episode of children's play in a preschool classroom.

A Case Study

This paper investigates an episode involving boys aged three and four years in the block area to show how they competently interacted with each other. In so doing, they drew on their resources of language (Danby & Baker, 2000). The classroom was in a childcare centre in an Australian city. In the episode, the teacher intervened, yet analysis shows that the children themselves competently dealt with the interaction at hand. The teacher's presence could be described as having interrupted the talk and interaction occurring among the boys. Such analysis raises questions about the assumptions that are made about children's supposed lack of development (or competence), as well as the role of the teacher.

Children's play interactions were videorecorded over a three-week period, twenty-six hours in total. Prior to this, I had visited the classroom on a weekly basis. The children appeared to take little notice of either the video-recorder or my presence after the first few days. However, I cannot assume that my presence was not part of the scenes being filmed; in the episode discussed here, one boy directed his attention to the video-recorder.

Selected episodes were then chosen for detailed transcription, using the conventions of talk-in-interaction (Psathas, 1995). (The transcript notation appears in Appendix 1.) While the analytic focus examines talk and its details as a topic in its own right (Sacks, 1984), it also takes into account non-verbal interaction, such as gestures. Because the transcript describes the pauses in the talk, as well as the overlaps and intonations, a fine-grained representation of the talk allows for detailed interpretations. The video-recordings and transcripts have been reviewed many times to help understand what was happening in the event.

When first glancing at the episode, it is easy to think the children were *not* using the features of talk competently. At times, their talk appeared to be overlapping and incoherent. However, close examination showed that the children were indeed competent interpreters of their social worlds, using the same types of specific strategies that adults do for organising their talk and for ensuring that others hear their

messages. In an analysis less concerned with examining the moment-by-moment utterances, the children's accomplishments might have been overlooked.

The episode

The three boys were in the block area when conflict arose over who could play there. Andrew began by telling David that he needed Alan's help (turn 27). As Andrew had directed his request to David, it appears that David had been given the rights of a leader, which is to choose who gets to play there.

Extract 1

27	Andrew	he::y (1.0) he::y (1.0) he::::y ((high pitched squeal)) (1.0) loo:k (1.0) loo:k (1.0) loo:k (1.0) ((Andrew points to John leaving the area. He then turns towards block area and speaks to David.)) I need Alan Doyle to help.
28	David	No (0.5) he's not (0.5) help(.)ing ((points to Alan as Alan walks past with a block in his hand, Andrew turns to look at Alan.))
29	Matt	he can. ((bending over block building appearing to add a block))
30	David	he's not
31	Matt	he's helping. ((still bending over the block building, then straightens up))
32		(2.0)

After David announced that Alan couldn't play (turn 28), Matt entered the discussion, siding with Andrew and stating that Alan should be allowed to help. This exchange escalated, until the boys began issuing threats towards David. By Extract 2, the focus of the talk was not on whether Alan could join the boys in block area, but a series of threats aimed at David.

Extract 2

45	David	If he doesn't go away [I won't smash it
46	Alan	[( ) you are a ( ) bash you right down ((pointing at David))

47	Andrew	YEAH (0.5) ((points and leans towards Alan)) I'm going to get a monster shark's shark and it will ea:t him A:::::LL up! ((Andrew grins and begins a jig, turns towards the camera.)) [hee hee hee hee* ((laughing gleefully))
48	Matt	[And I'll get a get a ro(.)bot* I'll get a robot shark crocodile monster and eat you °up°
49		(0.5)
50	Andrew	yea:::h=
51	Alan	=yea(hh)h(h) ((laughs)) ((looking towards Matt and then glancing towards David)) I'll get a big (plastic) dinosaur to eat him up ((points long block at David))
52	Matt	[( )* ((inaudible))
53	David	[And I'll* get a big (fire) eater RRRRRRRRR ((reaches out to Alan and makes grabbing motions)) [( )* ((inaudible))
54	Andrew	[I'll get a* I'll get a [tractor* ((Alan raises block above head.))
55	Alan	[No you don't* ((swings long block back over shoulder))
56	Andrew	and then he'll will eat you him up won't [he ((moving closer to Matt))
57	Matt	[( ) I'LL GET A (.) I'LL GET A BIG ((looking from Alan to Andrew)) I'LL GET A BIG (.) DINOSAUR WITH SPI:T AND AND AND IT WILL SPIT AT HIM ((very loud)) and he will °die::. ° ((spoken quietly))

A flurry of talk and interaction erupted as the boys called upon themes of monsters and objects of terror such as dinosaurs. Andrew initiated the theme of terror (turn 47), and Matt quickly added his own object of terror, a "robot shark crocodile monster" (turn 48), to eat David. Alan (turns 51) and Matt (turn 57) also joined in the exchange by drawing upon the dinosaur theme. David also knew the language of terror as he had initiated and used similar threats effectively in previous situations in block area (Danby & Baker, 1998a, 2000). Despite being the target this time, he still participated in the interaction, moving the topic from sharks and dinosaurs to that of a "(fire) eater" (turn 53).

This type of terror talk may have appeared a language game, but it also shows the very serious business of young children making and reconstructing their social positions through opposition (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1987; Danby & Baker, 2000). In this sequence of talk, each boy used a similar pattern of language. Each began their turn with "I'm going to get a" (turn 47) or "I'll get a" (turns 48, 51, 53, 54 and 57) to describe the terrible object that was going to eat David. This repetition shows clearly the powerful collaborative efforts of Alan, Matt and Andrew working in unison, against David.

Evident in this transcript is the overlapping of the boys' turns (Danby & Baker, 2000). At first, the boys' talk seemed very chaotic, with little sense of them speaking in turn. However, close examination revealed that the boys were engaging in collaborative talk. Their talk was finely tuned to what each other was saying as well as when they stopped and started their turns. The boys used a device known as recycled turn beginnings (Schegloff, 1987) to get their messages heard by each other. For instance, Andrew (turn 54) started his talk before David had finished his turn.

53	David	[And I'll* get a big (fire) eater RRRRRRRRR ((reaches out towards Alan and makes grabbing motions))
		[( )* ((inaudible))
54	Andrew	[I'll get a* I'll get a
		[tractor* ((Alan raises block above head.))

As soon as David finished his turn (turn 53), Andrew immediately repeated "I'll get a" (turn 54). By starting to talk before David had finished, Andrew had ensured that he would be the next speaker. At the same time, Andrew's repetition of "I'll get a" meant that his entire message was heard. This evidence of fast talking and close and careful listening to each other's talk shows the competent ways in which the boys negotiated their language interactions.

The boys' orientation to each other through their coordinated talk around objects of terror built a consistent message for David. Alan had now moved from being an outsider to the block area membership to being an active participant. David, on the other hand, seemed to be no longer the leader of the boys, but rather, their target.

Consistently, Matt (turn 57), Andrew (turns 47 and 56) and Alan (turn 51) talked about David using the third person pronoun. David was consistently referred to as *him*. In talking *about* David, and not *to* him, David was being excluded from active participation in the group. No longer deemed an active group member by the other boys, he could be no longer a player in block area, let alone maintain his leadership status.

As the talk drawing on objects of terror escalated, the teacher arrived. Although she had not been invited, David immediately turned to her (turn 60).

Extract 3

59		((The teacher leans over the block shelves.))
60	David	I DON'T WANT HIM DOWN HERE ((to teacher))
61	Teacher	((leaning over block shelf)) Well can you find a space to build away ( )
62	Andrew	((to teacher)) YEAH (.) AND HE AND HE W- WANTS TO BUILD SOMETHING (.) A- A- AND HE ((reaches towards teacher and brushes David's arm, Alan is building with the blocks.))DAVID WON'T LET HIM BUILD WITH US
63	David	And Alan
64	Matt	(police) ((mostly inaudible))
65	David	( ) knock down this building ((walks away from teacher and Andrew; David bends over as if to start building with the blocks.))
66	Teacher	[[( ) ((overlapping talk that is mostly inaudible))
67	Andrew	[[( ) ((to teacher))
68	Alan	[[( ) my friend ( ) ((to teacher))
69	?	[[( ) look around you ( ) ((to teacher))
70	?	[[look around you ( ) ((to teacher))
71	Teacher	((nods))
72	Matt	NO::W
73		(1.0)
74	Teacher	You talk to each other and sort it out ( ) ((The teacher walks away.))

After the teacher's departure, David and Andrew became involved in a physical struggle. Neither boy was hurt, but there appeared to be a real possibility that David would hit Andrew or one of the other boys with a block. The episode concluded with David evicted, Alan in the block area, and Matt (the new leader) initiating building projects.

It is interesting to speculate what might have happened if the teacher had not arrived at this particular moment. But, on the teacher's arrival, David promptly told her that he did not want Alan in block area (turn 60). David had returned to the argument that had started this episode, the question of Alan's entry into block area. The teacher's reply, "well," suggests that she was delaying her response, perhaps in weak disagreement (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1987; Sacks, 1987) with David's claim. This possibility is supported, as the teacher continued by suggesting that "you find a space to build away" (turn 61). Without waiting for David's response, Andrew (turn 62) told the teacher that David was refusing to allow Alan to build with them. In this instance, Andrew had let the teacher know that David had broken a classroom rule by not sharing and playing together.

What happened next appeared to be the boys' immediate responses to the teacher's suggestion that one of the boys build elsewhere and to Andrew's comment that David was not a cooperative player. Turns 63-72 show a "jamming of the airwaves" (Danby & Baker, 2000). All the boys talked at once. It sounded chaotic as they talked over each other's talk. It was almost impossible to work out who was saying what. In turn 66, the teacher's comment is not audible on the video-recording. She nodded (turn 71) and finally, she said, "You talk to each other and sort it out" and she walked away from block area (turn 74).

Taking a developmental perspective, it would be easy to suggest that these boys had yet to develop their competence about learning rules for talking in turn. In other words, they could be described as not competent turn-takers, as their talk seemed jumbled and chaotic, appearing to talk over each other and all talking at once. A closer examination, however, shows that the boys appeared to have used the particular strategy of talking over each other's turns or all talking together for particular purposes. In the first instance, when each boy began his utterances before the other had finished, each boy was successful in gaining the floor to talk as well as having their message heard. In the second instance, in the presence of the teacher, the boys set up a chorus of noise that meant that it was impossible to hear anything. The success of this strategy is evident in turn 74, when the teacher left and the boys resumed their play interactions. They had successfully disposed of the teacher so that

they could continue their interactions in their own space and in their own way. What at first may have appeared the boys' apparent incompetence in language use actually showed their interactional competence in dealing with the teacher's unwanted intrusion.

Conclusion

This paper acknowledges the competence of young children in constructing their own social orders. If children are already competent to do this, an assumption might be to think that the teacher cannot (or should not) take an active role in the management and organisation of the classroom and in their interactions with children. This assumption is unwarranted because the work of children is done always within the teachers' frameworks and pedagogy. For example, children in classrooms operate within the physical boundaries of space, resources and time, all framed and influenced by adult and institutional practices.

The purpose of this paper has been not to discuss what the teacher might or might not have done differently in this situation. Rather, the focus was to highlight the complex work of the young children themselves in organising and managing their everyday social situations and play spaces. By considering children to be competent social beings, educators can bring to their pedagogic practices different understandings of children. For example, educators can ask themselves:

1. 1. Do I construct children as developing, immature or incomplete?
2. 2. Do I recognise the complex interactional work of children?

Educators can consider also children's communicative competence in the following ways:

1. 1. Look for examples of children's competence in organising their social worlds. For example, have you observed young children competently resolving their play disputes without the intervention of the adult? How did they do this?
2. **2.** Understand that children's daily play experiences are significant for the here-and-now, and not just for their future development. This requires a changed focus to analyse not how children play in preparation for future development but how they work to organise and make sense of their day-to-day, moment-by-moment occurrences.

Such considerations invite early childhood educators to reconsider ways of understanding and working with young children.

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Appendix 1

Transcript notation (Psathas, 1995)

( )	word(s) not audible
(was)	best guess
(( ))	transcriber's description
<u>but</u>	emphasis
<u>BUT</u>	greater emphasis
[	two speakers' turns overlap
[[	more than two speakers' turns overlap
=	no interval between turns
<u>not</u>	rising inflection
°up°	talk has a lower volume than the surrounding talk
do:on't	sound extended
(h)	in-breath for laughter
(2.0)	(2.0) pause timed in seconds